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AUTHOR Flynn, Elizabeth A.
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ABSTRACT

Twenty-six women and 26 men enrolled in a humanities course at Michigan Technological University wrote their initial impressions to short stories by James Joyce, James Baldwin, Doris Lessing, and Virginia Woolf. The names were removed and the journal entries were analyzed in light of these four questions: (1) Do women refer to their personal experience more than men when writing about literature? (2) Do women see their own inadequacies as readers as the cause of their frustration when reading difficult texts? (3) Do women think of texts as objects created by an author or as depictions of relatively unmediated experience? (4) Are women more sensitive to female experience than are men when they read texts? The data revealed that neither men nor women related texts to their own experiences very frequently and, if anything, men did so more frequently than women. It also showed that women more frequently attributed their frustration to the text itself, while men more often attributed their frustration to their own inadequacies. In addition, the data indicated that male students were more aware of the text as a created object than were the women, and that more women than men referred to female characters, particularly when the characters were peripheral. (HTH)

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Elizabeth A. Flynn
Department of Humanities
Michigan Technological University
Houghton, Michigan 49931

Woman as Reader: Pedagogical Implications

A "transactional" theory of the reading process emphasizes the importance of the participation of the reader in the creation of the meaning of a text. Theorists such as Louise Rosenblatt, David Bleich, and Wolfgang Iser[1] remind us that reading is an "event" which necessitates the active involvement of the reader. This event is different for each individual since readers select details from a text (a process Rosenblatt calls "selective attention") or create patterns of meaning (what Iser calls "consistent patterns") in accordance with their unique personal histories. Rosenblatt explains that the "total literary transaction" involves the reader's "whole past experience of life and literature. His [sic] memories, his present preoccupations, his sense of values, his aspirations, enter into a relationship with a text."[2]

Most of the work that has been done thus far in illustrating the transaction between reader and text has demonstrated the reading processes of particular readers. Response critics with a psychoanalytic orientation such as Norman Holland and David Bleich, for instance, have explored the psychological factors influential in determining the responses of individual readers. There is, however, also a need for an exploration of the relationship between groups of readers and texts. Politicized criticism such as feminist or Marxist criticism deals not with individuals but with groups (based upon class or gender, for instance), and so we need to know if groups of individuals share common perceptions about texts. If they do, what is the nature of those shared perceptions?[3] David Bleich, more than any other reader response critic, has explored what he calls the "collective interests" or the "collectively held motives" of readers. In both Readings and Feelings and Subjective Criticism he makes it clear that "subjectivity" is shared by groups which have common interests or values, and this shared subjectivity becomes manifest in the forms knowledge takes. He says, "In a subjective framework of thought, the seemingly different phenomena of cultural prominence or popularity, generic classification, and historical periodization may each be understood as knowledge formulated under the aegis of collectively held motives."[4] Bleich's analysis is essentially apolitical, though. He concentrates on the collectivity of the classroom and emphasizes the compliance of the members of that collectivity. His language suggests that groups arise because individuals will them into being: he says, "The term group formation...can refer to a collection of people who form themselves into a group."[5] A political analysis of group formation, however, emphasizes that groups

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arise and are stratified because there are inequities in the social order: the empowered oppress the powerless. Group affiliation is not chosen but imposed. Collective interests exist not primarily because of varying subjective preferences but because material conditions dictate them.

Research I conducted recently aims to establish the link between collective perceptions and political realities. I studied the responses of women and men to four short stories in an attempt to determine if the two groups differed in their perceptions of texts. This paper is a report of my findings and an exploration of their pedagogical implications.

This present study had its genesis in a project I undertook last spring and summer. I examined the journal entries of three women and seven men in a course I taught called "James Joyce's Ulysses."[6] The analysis of the journals suggested that women and men do respond to texts differently. The women more frequently related the text to their own experience and tended to cite their own inadequacies as readers as the cause of the difficulties they were having with the text. The men rarely brought their personal experience to bear and tended to blame their frustration in reading the novel on the author or the text itself. I concluded from these findings that men had to be taught to respond more subjectively to texts and that women had to be taught to read texts such as Ulysses more assertively. I was well aware of the tentative nature of my conclusions, however. Results based upon a sample of ten readers can hardly be conclusive. I decided to examine a larger number of responses and so asked for the cooperation of a less sophisticated group of readers--freshmen in the required literature/composition course at Michigan Technological University. This study describes the journal entries of 26 women and 26 men who were enrolled this past spring quarter in seven sections of Humanities 103.

My original hypotheses--that women would more frequently relate the texts to their own experiences and that they would more frequently blame their frustration in reading difficult stories on themselves rather than the author or the text itself--were not confirmed. Neither men nor women related the stories to their own experience very frequently, and expressions of frustration in reading a story were few: those which did appear suggested that the men had slightly stronger feelings of inadequacy as readers than the women. The study indicates, however, that in those areas of identification with the situation described by the story and sensitivity to female experience, there are gender differences. Women seemed to be less aware of the text as an object created by an author than did the men and so perhaps identified with the situation presented in the story more directly. Women also seemed to be more sensitive to female experience described in the stories than were the men.

These findings are also tentative, though, because they perhaps reflect only the sensibilities of technologically-oriented men and women rather than the general population of men and women college students. Michigan Tech students are generally more capable and more achievement-oriented than the average college student and are considerably more able

in science and math. In the fall of 1978, for instance, incoming freshmen scored a significant two points higher in English in the American College Text than the general college population and an even more significant eight points higher in math.[7] Women at Michigan Tech are especially unrepresentative since many were recruited for engineering programs because of their demonstrated achievement in science and math in high school. The study perhaps only tells us about the "collective perceptions" of science and engineering-oriented students.

The pool of students I drew upon in preparing my sample were enrolled in sections of HU 103 taught by myself and two male colleagues--a total of seven sections. I was interested in including a substantial number of female students in the study but recognized the difficulty of doing so at Michigan Tech where the ratio of women to men in the '79-80 freshmen class was 1 to 3. The ratio of women to men in the regular composition courses is even lower since a number of women students place into honors sections. Although I had hoped for a sample of 40 women and 40 men, I was only able to include 26 men and 26 women because of the small number of women students in the seven sections which participated in the project and because I eliminated from the sample students who were not taking the course in sequence (and hence were probably not freshmen) and students who did not have complete sets of journal entries on the four stories. The 26 women and 26 men were fairly representative of the freshman class as a whole. The women in the sample had a mean score of 20.5 on their English ACT (compared to the mean score for all freshmen women at Michigan Tech of 21.7) while the men in the sample had a mean score of 19.04 on their English ACT (compared to the mean score for all freshmen men at Michigan Tech of 19.8).[8] These scores indicate that in both the sample and the freshman class as a whole, women had somewhat higher verbal abilities, at least as measured by the ACT. Students in the sample were representative of Michigan Tech freshmen in other ways as well. All but two men and one woman were in the 18-19 age range. Twenty-four of the 26 men were majoring in a field related to science, engineering, or math; the remaining two were majoring in business administration. Eighteen of the women were majoring in a field related to science, engineering, or math; the remaining eight were majoring in nursing (3), business administration (4), and social sciences (1). None of the students was majoring in humanities.

The four short stories used in the study were James Joyce's "Araby," James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," Doris Lessing's "The Black Madonna," and Virginia Woolf's "Kew Gardens," all of which are in The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction.[9] The stories represent a rich diversity of characters, themes, and settings and also a range of difficulty. "Kew Gardens" is certainly the most difficult of the four, "The Black Madonna" probably the easiest. The Joyce, Baldwin, and Lessing stories are typical of much literature in that their protagonists are male and they center on male experience. The Woolf story, in contrast, is androgynous; both male and female experience are included in fairly equal proportions. All four stories involve situations which the average college freshman can

relate to.

Students wrote their responses to the stories during the first twenty minutes of the first class session in which the story was to be discussed. Their responses are relatively free, therefore, of my attitudes and opinions and of the attitudes and opinions of their classmates. They represent initial impressions rather than fully worked out positions. I emphasized that students were free to respond to a story in any way they saw fit. In order to give them a sense of the possible range of responses, though, I suggested that they might 1) summarize or describe the story; 2) analyze or interpret the story; 3) relate the story to their own experience. Students took the journal writing very seriously, perhaps because they knew that their responses would constitute 15% of their grade. But in order to minimize the impingement of my authority on their responses, I explained that full credit would be assigned if the response indicated that the student had read the text carefully, and I provided little or no feedback on the individual responses. The other two instructors did likewise.

The data were analyzed by a method called "content analysis."[10] Content categories were established and then the journal entries were "blind-coded," i.e., names were removed from the papers so that the gender of the author was not known when the coding was done. The codes themselves grew out of the research questions I hoped to answer: 1) Do women refer to their personal experience more frequently than do men when they write about literature? (i.e., do they relate texts to their personal lives more readily than do men?); 2) Do women see their own inadequacies as readers as the cause of their frustration when reading difficult texts? 3) Do women think of texts as objects created by an author or as depictions of relatively unmediated experience? 4) Are women more sensitive to female experience than are men when they read texts, especially ones which focus upon male experience? The entries were first classified according to their overall pattern; here the three kinds of responses which were suggested were the basis of the classification--summary, interpretation, and discussion of personal experience. The individual assertions were then coded. Statements which indicated personal involvement in the story were identified; evaluative statements were identified, and those which were expressions of frustration were subdivided into those which emphasized the difficulty of the text and those which emphasized the inadequacy of the reader; references to the author were counted; references to male and female characters were counted.

The hypothesis that women refer to their personal experience more frequently than do men when they write about literature was not confirmed by the data. Neither the women nor the men related to the text to their own experience very frequently. Of the 208 responses coded (52 students responding to four stories), only eight were primarily descriptions of personal experience and only five more contained extended discussions of a personalized nature. If anything, the men related texts to their own experience more frequently than the women; six responses by men were primarily discussions of personal experience compared to two responses by

women. When individual assertions were coded rather than overall patterns of response, no significant gender differences emerged. Of the numerous assertions in the 208 journal entries, only 35 could be considered personalized responses--17 by men and 18 by women--and of those, only three (one by a man and two by women) were revelations of private experience. The remainder were the briefest references to the self or discussions of personalized experience in a very generalized way. Perhaps both women and men who have a science or math orientation are reluctant to reveal their private experiences in journal entries.[11]

The second hypothesis, that women see their inadequacies as readers as the cause of their frustration when reading difficult texts, was not confirmed either. Of the many assertions in the 208 response statements, only 55 were evaluative or judgmental, 31 by women and 24 by men. Twelve of the women's judgments were also expressions of frustration compared to 14 of the men's. But the women most frequently attributed their frustration to the text itself (seven references to the difficulty of a text versus four admissions of their own inadequacies) while the men more often attributed their frustration to their own inadequacies (seven admissions of inadequacy versus six references to the difficulty of the text). These responses can perhaps be explained by the fact that the women had somewhat better verbal skills than the men to begin with and hence had more confidence in themselves as readers. One unexpected outcome of the coding of judgmental assertions was the discovery that the women made more positive evaluative statements than did the men (neither group made many negative evaluative statements). Women made 16 positive assessments of texts in contrast to eight positive assessments by men. This suggests that the women had a somewhat more positive attitude toward their reading than did the men.

The third hypothesis, that women think of texts as relatively unmediated experience rather than as objects created by an author was confirmed by the data. In the 104 entries written by women, 54 references was made to the author whereas in the same number of entries by men, 76 references were made. Fourteen women made reference to the author in response statements while 20 men made such a reference. This suggests that the male students were more aware of the text as a created object than were the women. Interestingly, both women and men evidenced awareness of the author in their responses to "Kew Gardens." Thirteen women and 16 men referred to Woolf when discussing the story. It is apparently difficult to ignore the presence of an author who employs unusual stylistic techniques.

The fourth hypothesis, that women are more sensitive than men to female experience, was confirmed by the data also. As might be expected, almost all students referred to at least one male character when discussing "Araby," "Sonny's Blues" and "The Black Madonna." These stories, after all, center on male experience. Nor is it surprising that most students referred to a female character when discussing "Araby" since it is difficult to describe the protagonist's quest without at least mentioning the object of that quest--Mangan's sister. But in "Sonny's Blues" and

"The Black Madonna" the women characters are definitely peripheral. It is significant, therefore, that more women than men referred to female characters in these stories. Eleven women discussed female characters in "Sonny's Blues" and nine women discussed female characters in "The Black Madonna" whereas only six male students discussed female characters in "Sonny's Blues" and only two male students discussed female characters in "The Black Madonna." Some women readers were well aware that the lives of the male protagonists were intimately intertwined with the lives of wives and mothers and mistresses and children, even if these characters are not highlighted in the story itself.

The results of the study have pedagogical implications. If neither women nor men students who are technologically oriented feel comfortable relating texts to their personal lives, perhaps they should be encouraged to do so. They might be asked to keep reading journals in which they are required to compare the situations described in the stories to experiences they have had. Literature will no doubt become more meaningful to them as they begin to appreciate the ways in which it can help them interpret their own lives. And if men tend to see texts as objects shaped by authors then perhaps they should be encouraged to appreciate, as well, the extent to which literature is also a comment on life. Writing assignments which ask them to analyze characters as if they were people rather than constructs might sensitize students to the ways in which literature can help us understand others. And if most literature provides insight into male experience but neglects female experience, then students, male students especially, should be provided a balanced perspective. Teachers might pair stories which focus upon men and stories which focus on women. They should also attempt to make visible the female experience which is often buried in texts primarily about men. Students might be asked to analyze peripheral characters, or to imagine how a story would be transformed if a peripheral character became a main character. It would be fruitful, too, to encourage dialogue between male and female students since it appears that women students, because they are sensitive to female experience, can help male students see texts in new ways.

If teachers recognize that their classrooms are composed of groups as well as individuals and that members of those groups often share perceptions about literature, then they can make productive use of the opportunities for dialogue that the classroom provides. If they recognize, further, that groups exist in a political world where some are more powerful than others, then they themselves can become instruments in the elimination of oppression.[13]

NOTES

[1]See David Bleich, Readings and Feelings (NCTE, 1975); Bleich, Subjective Criticism (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Iser, The Act of Reading (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Louise Rosenblatt, The Reader, the Text, the Poem (Southern Illinois University Press, 1978).

[2]Rosenblatt, p. 81.

[3]Mary Hiatt in The Way Women Write (Teachers College Press, 1977) argues convincingly that women as a group have a writing style which is different from the writing style of men. See also Robin Lakoff, Language and Woman's Place (Harper and Row, 1975); Mary Ritchie Key, Male/Female Language (The Scarecrow Press, 1975); Douglas Butturff and Edmund L. Epstein, eds. Women's Language and Style (University of Akron, 1978).

[4]Bleich, Subjective Criticism, p. 265.

[5]Bleich, p. 264. Bleich has examined gender differences in his essay, "Report from Indiana: On Two Courses," Reader, No. 7, 1980, pp. 15-22. He concludes, "In reading prose fiction, men seemed to hear the author's voice speaking, while women experienced the reading through the mind of the character they perceived as central—they reported themselves being more "in" the work; in reading poetry, men and women perceived, with equal emphasis, the author's voice as the objectified speaker of the poem: neither sex reported feeling "in" the poem." In the essay Bleich does not explore the political implications of his conclusions.

[6]See my article, "Women Reading: A Phenomenological Approach," Reader, No. 8, 1980, pp. 16-22. The entire issue of the newsletter was devoted to "woman as reader."

[7]ACT scores range from 1-33.

[8]The mean scores for the samples were based on the scores of 24 women and 24 men since data were not available for two women and two men.

[9]R. V. Cassill, ed. The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction, shorter ed.. W. W. Norton Co., Inc., 1978.

[10]For a discussion of the uses of content analysis in response criticism see Alan C. Purves and Victoria Rippere, Elements of Writing

About a Literary Work: A Study of Response to Literature (NCTE, 1968). The categories Purves and Rippere suggest differ considerably from my own. See also Alan C. Purves and Richard Beach, Literature and the Reader (NCTE, 1972).

[11]In an important study, James R. Squire found, as I did, that interpretive responses generally outnumber other kinds of responses. He found that in the free responses of 52 adolescents to four short stories, 42% of the responses were interpretational. See Squire, The Responses of Adolescents While Reading Four Short Stories (NCTE, 1964). In my study, 53% of the responses were entirely interpretational and another eight percent contained some interpretation. In a study similar to Squire's but employing a sample of college freshmen, James R. Wilson found that college freshmen respond with a significantly higher percentage of interpretational responses than did the adolescents in Squire's study. See Wilson, Responses of College Freshmen to Three Novels (NCTE, 1966).

[12]Characters were counted only when they were actually discussed in the responses. Women who were only briefly mentioned were not counted. The method I devised for distinguishing between those discussed and those mentioned was to count those women who were the subject of a verb (in either a dependent clause or an independent clause) and to exclude women who functioned in sentences only as objects of prepositions or direct or indirect objects.

[13]The research for this paper was made possible by a Faculty Research Grant from Michigan Technological University.